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4205 Victoria Boulevard  
Hampton, Virginia

THE FIRST FREE SCHOOL

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A Thesis  
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## CHAPTER III

## HAMPTON ACADEMY

In this chapter we shall examine the early history of the first free school, and its interrelationship with the various aspects of a developing culture in Virginia.

We shall examine two attacks upon our basic theory that the Syms Free School was truly the first free school in North America. First, we shall review the attitude of Governor Berkeley, with its far-reaching and permanently detrimental effects. Secondly, we shall analyze the belief of some critics that the first Latin grammar school of Boston antedated the Syms school, and we shall attempt to show that this belief is ill-founded. Having established the chronological priority of the Syms Free School of 1634-35, we shall proceed to an examination of its establishment and early growth, followed by a similar examination of the beginnings of the Eaton Charity School of 1659. In closing we shall examine the conditions which led to a consolidation of the two schools, under the name of Hampton Academy, 1805.

## ORIGIN OF THE FIRST FREE SCHOOL

It is impossible for us, in the twentieth century, to determine with any degree of accuracy what the fate of the

Syms Free School may have been if the environment into which it was born had been more favorable to its growth and development. It is reasonable to assume, however, that its usefulness would have been enhanced by more favorable circumstances, and that the vicissitudes of war, Indian attacks and constant controversies had a detrimental effect upon the growth and development of the school. Philip Alexander Bruce states that if these detrimental influences had not existed the school would be today equal in its record of usefulness to "those similar foundations in England" which have been "preserved in their original vigor" under the "happier conditions that prevailed in that more stable land."<sup>1</sup>

By his will, dated February 12, 1634, Benjamin Syms founded a free school in Elizabeth City County, Virginia, which is the oldest endowed public school in English speaking North America. It came to be known as the Syms Free School, and it retained that name for more than a century. In 1659 another school of similar origin was established by Dr. Thomas Eaton, with a larger endowment, and in 1805 the property of each of the two schools was sold. The combined funds were used to erect a new building at a convenient location, in the city of Hampton, Virginia. Today, the successor of the two schools still stands. It is a large public elemen-

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<sup>1</sup>Philip Alexander Bruce, Institutional History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century, Vol. 1, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1910.

... school in Hampton, with the name of Willis-Syms-Eaton school. The original grant from the Syms-Eaton fund is now in trust with the Elizabeth City County School Board, and \$16,000 of it has been invested in United States Government bonds. The interest from this fund is being used to support current public education for the children of Hampton, Phoebus, and Elizabeth City County.<sup>1a</sup>

The author of a little pamphlet, published in London in 1647, wrote, "I may not forget to tell you that we have a free school, with two hundred acres of land, a fine house upon it, forty milch kine, and other accommodations to it. The benefactor deserveth perpetual mention, Mr. Benjamin Symmes, worthy to be chronicled. Other petty schools we have."<sup>2</sup> And yet, we know little about this early friend of universal education, who is "worthy to be chronicled." From the earliest records we learn that he was born in 1590. In 1623 he was living at "Basse's Choice," in Virginia, which is the present Isle of Wight County.<sup>3</sup> In 1629 Thomas Warnet, a leading merchant of Jamestown, bequeathed Benjamin Syms a

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<sup>1a</sup>Letter to Ethel Garber from C. Alton Lindsay, Division Superintendent of Schools, Hampton and Elizabeth City County, Virginia, March 8, 1948.

<sup>2</sup>Edward D. Neill, The History of Education in Virginia during the Seventeenth Century, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1867, p. 25. (Photostatic copy in Manuscripts Division, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.)

<sup>3</sup>William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine (first series), Vol. 6, October, 1897, p. 72.

weeding hoe,<sup>4</sup> and this appears to be the beginning of his sole means for accumulating wealth in Virginia.

He was living at Elizabeth City in 1634-35, at which time he made his famous will<sup>5</sup> bequeathing two hundred acres of land on the Poquoson, a small river which empties into Chesapeake Bay near Yorktown, not more than a mile below the mouth of York River,<sup>6</sup> together with the milk and increase of eight cows, for the education and instruction of the children of Elizabeth City and Kecoughtan, "from Mary's Mount downward to the Poquoson River."<sup>7</sup> The great benefactor states in his bequest,

Item My Will and desire is that the Worshipful the Commander and ye rest of the Commissioners of this liberty with the ministers and Church Wardens of the said Parish where the said School is founded to see it from time to time justly & truly performed.

Item My Will and Desire is that when it please God there is sufficient increase of the said cattle yt some part of them be saved for the erecting a very sufficient School house and the Rest of the Increase that are left to be disposed of before nominated and in Repairing the said School

Item My Will is that the Increase of the said Cattle after the said School Master is sufficiently stocked for his

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 72-73. (Reprinted from Education in Colonial Virginia, Part III.)

<sup>5</sup>Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, Vol. 24, June, 1916, p. 241.

<sup>6</sup>William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine, (first series), Vol. 6, October, 1897, p. 72. See p. 12 supra. Also, Neill, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 73. Also p. 12 supra.

maintainance shall be spent according to the directions of the said Commander & Commissions with the rest of them to mainteyne poor children, or decayed or maimed persons of the said parish.<sup>8</sup>

This bequest of Benjamin Syms antedated by four years the famous bequest of John Harvard of Cambridge, Massachusetts, which consisted of half of his estate and his entire library,<sup>9</sup> and which became the "corner-stone" of the contemporary Harvard University,<sup>10</sup> and most historians therefore recognize the Syms school as the beginning of free education in English North America:

As his will leaving valuable property for the support of the free school projected by the same document bore the date of February 1634-5, his bequest precedes by several years the Rev. John Harvard's far more famous gift, which became the corner-stone of Harvard College. In reality, we are indebted to Benjamin Symmes for the earliest foundation for free education made in English America by a citizen of an English colony; and for that reason, his name is entitled to extraordinary honor in a land where the first free school system has been carried to the highest state of usefulness perhaps to be observed on the globe.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>The Will of Benjamin Syms, 1634. A certified copy of the will is in the Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia. (From Edgar W. Knight, A Documentary History of Education in the South Before 1860, Vol. 1, Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1949, pp. 203-204.)

<sup>9</sup>Gillie Cary McCabe, The Story of an Old Town, Hampton, Virginia, Richmond: Old Dominion Press, 1929, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup>Bruce, op. cit., p. 350.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 350.

establishment of such schools, and, like other historical movements, it had a tendency to generate the repetition of such bequests until the social order should so change as to render them impractical. Nevertheless, this fact does not reduce the significance of the bequest itself, and of the legislation pertaining to it. Regardless of the specific reasons for the bequest, and the influence of the legislation pertaining to it, the fact remains that the will of Benjamin Syms marks the earliest recorded provision for the establishment of a free school in America, and the benefactor is still "worthy to be chronicled." From the purely personal standpoint, we are uncertain as to whether Syms himself had any idea of the significance of his bequest, and whether his outstanding motive was that of personal recognition or that of philanthropy. But the important practical considerations are what Benjamin Syms did (not why he did it), and how the legislature reacted (not why it so reacted).

The school is mentioned again in a little pamphlet, A Perfect Description of Virginia, published in London in 1647. "I may not forget to tell you we have a free school, with two hundred acres of land, a fine house upon it, forty milch kine and other accomodations. The benefactor deserveth perpetual mention, Mr. Benjamin Syms, worthy to be chronicled. Other petty schools we have."<sup>32</sup> The last statement would indicate

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<sup>32</sup>A Perfect Description of Virginia, op. cit.

that there were more schools in Virginia at that time than we have any record of.

The fact that this school was continued, through all the trying circumstances that developed during the centuries that followed, is, as Mrs. Armstrong so aptly says, an indication that the people of Virginia were very strong in their interest in the development of education.

At this date then (1647), it is certain that "The Syms Free School" was upon a substantial footing and of recognized importance, and . . . there has, from its establishment in 1634 to the present day, been no break in its history. This is the more remarkable by reason of its location, which has been such from the beginning as to expose it, again and again, to the risk of unavoidable neglect and of interruption, while more than once it has just escaped complete destruction. That the fund, in one shape or another, should have been held intact, is singularly creditable to "The Trustees and Governors and their successors" into whose keeping it had fallen and who must, without doubt, and with few exceptions, have been men who felt deeply the responsibility of their trust.<sup>33</sup>

Regarding the succeeding history of the school, we are able to extract snapshots here and there, from the few records that have been preserved. Legislation of 1693 would indicate that the schoolmaster was expected to take the responsibility for seeing that the school property was taken care of, though he could expect adequate remuneration for making the necessary improvements.

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<sup>33</sup>Mrs. F. M. Armstrong, The Syms-Eaton Free School (Published for the Benefit of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities), pp. 6-7.



Nov. 20, 1693.- It is ordered yt Robert Crooke Schoolmaster at Symmes School be allowed and paid for his charges in repairing ye school House two old cowes in lieu thereof.<sup>34</sup>

Bruce tells us that in November, 1699, Robert Crooke announced that he would resign at the "next fall of the leaf," and that Samuel Snignell

promptly petitioned the justices of the county court to appoint him Crooke's successor; and in doing so, declared his readiness to "undertake ye education of ye children according to the design of the donor." The court seems to have thought favorably of his qualifications, for they chose him to fill the position as soon as it was vacant; which, it would appear, would not occur until the autumn of 1700. It is to be inferred from the contents of the order naming Snignell that the school's endowment had suffered no diminution; the land had remained intact; and the livestock had very probably steadily increased since 1647, at which date, the herd of cows was five times larger than it had been in 1635, when the bequest was first announced. The only limit to the increase in the size of this herd was fixed by the area of ground reservable for their pasturage. The management of the whole property seems to have devolved on the schoolmaster, acting under the general supervision of the county court."<sup>35</sup>

In 1745 the schoolmaster of Syms Free School was a man by name of John Hunter, and at that time he protested against the handling of a family estate.<sup>36</sup> Also, "On the petition of John Hunter, schoolmaster of Sims' Free School, it is ordered

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<sup>34</sup>Records of Elizabeth City County, 1692-1728, cited by Knight, op. cit., p. 206.

<sup>35</sup>Bruce, op. cit., pp. 352-353.

<sup>36</sup>Elizabeth City county records, July 17, 1745, cited by Mrs. Helen Jones Campbell, "The Syms and Eaton Schools and Their Successors," William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine (second series), Vol. 20, No. 1, January, 1940, p. 9.

that the trustees do meet at Hampton on Saturday the 10th day of August next to consider the said Petition."<sup>37</sup>

Some records indicate that the trustees not only attempted to prevent waste to the school property, but that they also provided for improvements. However, there are records that show just as definitely that they were sometimes negligent, and that they did not always manage the property efficiently.

The General Assembly which began at Williamsburg on February 27, 1752, and continued until November 1, 1753, passed an act which quoted the provisions of the will of Benjamin Syms, stated that the charitable intentions of this will had not been carried out effectually, and therefore provided that the county church officials to whose care Syms had intrusted his bequest should be incorporated as trustees of the school property and that they should be given specifically the right to nominate and appoint a schoolmaster, to see that he was examined by the minister and licensed by the governor, to visit the school and reform any abuses in its administration, and even to remove the schoolmaster if a majority of them agreed to do so. There is nothing in the act to show whether it was passed for the purpose of impressing careless and inefficient trustees with the importance of their responsibilities or whether the men in charge of the school were themselves seeking to be definitely incorporated as trustees and to have their powers specifically defined in order that they might have more control over the school.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Records of Elizabeth City County, July 17, 1745.  
(From Tyler's Historical and Genealogical Quarterly, Vol. 9, p. 204.)

<sup>38</sup>Esther Crane, "Tercentenary of an Educational Bequest," Elementary School Journal, Vol. 35 (November, 1934), pp. 205-211. See also Hening's Virginia Statutes at Large, Vol. VI, pp. 389-392.

hold certain lands devised by the will of Benjamin Syms, for a free school and other charitable uses." And the only reason explicitly stated for the passage of the Act is that "The charitable intention of the said Benjamin Syms, the donor, hath not been effectually fulfilled," in view of which fact it was enacted "That the said trustees and directors shall forever hereafter stand and be incorporated, established and founded, in name and deed, a body politic and corporate, to have continuance forever, by name of the trustees and governors of Syms free school."<sup>41</sup> It was the custom to rent the Syms farm to tenants, except for the plot on which was located the master's dwelling, and use the income for the upkeep of the school, and apparently "one acre at the southwest corner"<sup>42</sup> of the lot was the location of the school in 1760, and both before and after that date. It seems that George Wythe had been residing in the Back River vicinity for some time, and in 1760 he renewed his lease of the Syms land. "Had this great lawyer considered it necessary," says Mrs. Campbell, "to include in the indenture he drew up information concerning the boundaries or even the number of acres he was leasing, the present task of determining the site of the Syms school would be greatly sim-

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<sup>41</sup>Armstrong, op. cit., p. 12. See also Hening's Statutes at Large, Vol. VI.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

plified. As it is, the actual location of the building remains unidentified."<sup>43</sup>

In 1766 another advertisement for a master for Syms School appears in the Virginia Gazette, somewhat similar to the one that appeared in 1752:

A MASTER is wanted for SYME'S CHARITY SCHOOL, in Elizabeth City county. Any person inclined to undertake that office,<sup>44</sup> may apply to the Governours and Visitors of the School.

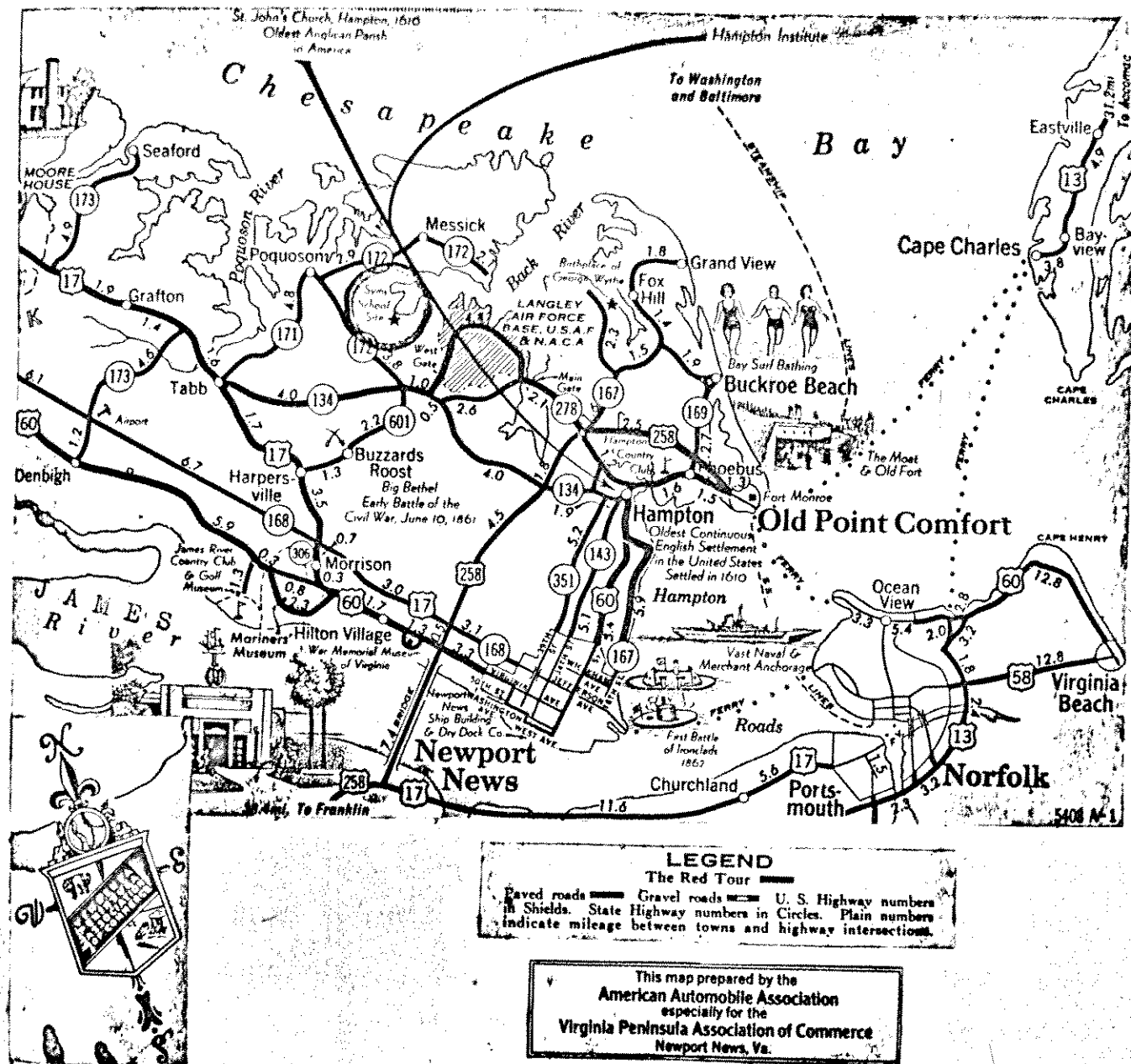
This advertisement, unlike the one appearing in 1752, does not describe the character of the person wanted for the position, but merely states that "any person inclined to undertake that office" should make application. However, it is probably not safe to make any bold assumptions regarding a possible increase in the difficulty involved in soliciting suitable persons to take the position.

The trustees and directors had a great deal of authority in all phases of the administration of the school. They were to nominate and appoint when, and often as they shall thinke good, such persons as they shall approve of, to be master of the said free school; which said master, before he be received or admitted to keep school, shall undergo an examination before the ministers of the said parish, for the time being, and produce a certificate of his capacity, and

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<sup>43</sup>Campbell, op. cit., p. 11. Infra, p. 61.

<sup>44</sup>The Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg, Alex. Purdie, and John Dixon), July 11, 1766, p. 2; also July 18, 1766, p. 3; July 25, 1766, p. 4, cited by Edgar W. Knight, A Documentary History of Education in the South before 1860, Vol. 1, Chapel Hill, North Carolina: the University of North Carolina Press, 1949, p. 216.



Map Showing  
 Approximate Location of the Original Syms School